

# ANNUAL REPORT 2022



APRIL 1, 2022 - MARCH 31, 2023

*Photo of Rough Hollow, Hinsdale County, conserved in 2022. Photo by Robin Gowdy.*

# 2022 HIGHLIGHTS

ANOTHER BANNER YEAR FOR CONSERVATION!

ANNUAL  
MONITORING AND  
STEWARDSHIP  
OF 681 COL  
CONSERVATION  
EASEMENTS



22 NEW  
CONSERVATION  
PROJECTS  
PROTECTING  
26,256 ACRES  
ACROSS COLORADO

SIGNIFICANT  
EXPANSION OF OUR  
LAND AND WATER  
RESTORATION  
PROGRAM



LEVERAGING  
PRIVATE FUNDS TO  
RAISE \$8.6 MILLION  
IN PUBLIC FUNDS  
FOR CONSERVATION  
AND RESTORATION

A FULL RELAUNCH  
OF OUR OUTREACH  
AND EDUCATIONAL  
PROGRAMS AFTER  
A TWO-YEAR COVID  
HIATUS



# 2023 INITIATIVES

## LOOKING TOWARD CREATIVE SOLUTIONS TO ADVANCE LAND & WATER PROTECTION IN COLORADO

In 2023, we are pursuing a suite of programs and initiatives that feature an ambitious pace of high-quality land protection and careful stewardship, an increase in land and water restoration, and the expansion of our public education and leadership development programs, plus a few new initiatives:

### INCREASED FOCUS ON CONSERVATION IN NORTHWEST COLORADO

### EXPANSION OF OUR LAND AND WATER RESTORATION WORK INTO DRYLAND RESTORATION

### GROUNDWATER PROTECTION IN THE SAN LUIS VALLEY

### EXPLORATION OF THE INTERSECTION BETWEEN LAND CONSERVATION AND RENEWABLE ENERGY GENERATION



*I Hook Ranch, Park County, conserved in 2022*

## NORTHWEST COLORADO CONSERVATION

As a region with some of our state's largest undeveloped parcels of land, Northwest Colorado represents a significant new opportunity in land conservation in the coming decade. Rising land values and the expanded conservation easement tax credit benefits have made conservation easements much more economically feasible for landowners in this region.

COL initiated a regional land value study several years ago that helped catalyze our first large-scale conservation project in that landscape – the 7,000-acre Baker's Peak Ranch that protected a critical winter habitat for North America's second largest elk herd. Since then, we have worked with several landowners to advance new conservation projects in Routt and Moffat counties west of Steamboat Springs.

Last year, our conservation team completed a detailed land ownership analysis, finding rich opportunities for large-scale land and water conservation in this region. In Moffat County, we identified 24 landowners who have property covering a total of 326,000 acres that would be highly desirable for conservation and rank particularly well for federal funding through the Natural Resource Conservation Service in the US Department of Agriculture. Another 30 landowners in Moffat County have an additional 200,000 acres that would be desirable candidates for conservation. We are working to shift and expand staff capacity to increase COL's focus on, and presence in, this landscape.



## DRYLAND RESTORATION

Since the expansion of our land and water restoration work and the hiring of a dedicated Restoration Program Manager, the program has grown and gained significant financial support from a diversity of public and private sources to deliver multiple years of restoration projects in South Park, Middle Park, North Park, the Northern Front Range, and the San Luis Valley.

As we have expanded this program, we have discovered a specific area of work that has both high demand and low capacity: the conversion of previously irrigated farmland into functional, non-irrigated “dryland” that can continue as grazing land and wildlife habitat.

As Colorado and other Western states face the reality of shrinking water supplies, some currently irrigated farmland is going to face the prospect of being dried up to conserve surface and aquifer water supplies. There is already a strong likelihood that up to 100,000 acres of irrigated farmland in the San Luis Valley will have to cease irrigation to protect the local aquifer and bring groundwater use to a sustainable level. With the likelihood of mandated reductions in the use of the Colorado River, this challenge will only grow.

While this body of work is currently under the direction of our existing Restoration Program Manager, we recognize the growing demand and will explore enlisting a dryland restoration specialist to focus on this work. This specialist would seek out fundraising opportunities for dryland restoration and other potential irrigation conversion projects.



# GROUNDWATER PROTECTION

Declining groundwater resources are a critical concern in many states, as these groundwater resources are a primary source of drinking water for rural communities and serve as a vital irrigation water supply for many farming and ranching economies. Since a changing climate means aquifers recharge more slowly and pumping technology increases, many aquifers are at risk. While the challenge extends throughout Colorado and the Intermountain West, one of the most acutely impacted regions is the San Luis Valley in Southern Colorado. San Luis Valley groundwater aquifers are directly related to surface water levels, which in turn can have additional impacts on water availability for irrigation as well as on habitat for a multitude of species. Long-term drought and overuse of groundwater has led the state to consider the drastic step of involuntary shutdown of groundwater pumping in the San Luis Valley, potentially devastating the economy of one of the most productive and historic agricultural communities in Colorado.

In response, Colorado Open Lands has developed an innovative and voluntary groundwater conservation easement model to pilot in Colorado's San Luis Valley, which could help address this concern in a much more beneficial way for the community. Groundwater conservation easements would compensate farmers and ranchers through federal funding and state tax incentives to permanently reduce their groundwater pumping, keeping water in the aquifer and increasing stream flows. Just as traditional easements restrict building, these easements restrict pumping, requiring the saved water to be stored in the aquifer. This effort brings together the groundwater management experience of local water districts with the collaborative expertise and conservation tools of a land trust to work with irrigators on a voluntary basis to bring the aquifer to a sustainable level and enhance wetlands and freshwater systems that support wildlife.

Earlier this year, COL completed our first significant groundwater easement on the 1,800-acre Peachwood Farm in the northern San Luis Valley. This project attracted significant national attention and federal support, and has now become a model for a national bill introduced in the U.S. Senate at the time of publication of this document. In the coming year, we look forward to building on this success and advancing more groundwater conservation projects, with the goal of reducing agricultural groundwater pumping to a sustainable level while ensuring the long-term health of the San Luis Valley's agricultural economy.



Peachwood Farms, Saguache County,  
COL's first groundwater easement, conserved in 2022

# CONSERVATION & RENEWABLE ENERGY

A growing tension in the conservation community is the need to expand renewable energy, while at the same time protect significant land and water resources from subdivision and development. Specifically in land conservation, conservation easements have not been eligible for tax benefits or other conservation funding if they allow commercial-scale solar energy development. In the context of a changing climate, this creates a tension between two like-minded constituencies. The prohibition of commercial-scale solar installations on lands protected with a conservation easement can also dissuade landowners from conserving their land, especially on lands that are facing reductions in available irrigation water that will need to have supplemental sources of farm and ranch revenue.

COL is interested in exploring how solar power generation can be more compatible with land conservation. Specifically, there is a growing body of research that some solar development can create beneficial microclimates that improve soil health, that grazing can replace pesticides in weed management around solar installations, and that food production can be compatible with solar panels.

We propose to develop a guide for Colorado's conservation community. Our research will examine the context of solar development (policy, law, feasibility) and enlist the help of solar researchers in Colorado. The guide will consider information on the solar development process to determine what characteristics of a property might be compatible with solar development and identify areas of concern (water rights abandonment or species sensitivity) to allow land trusts to evaluate projects. We would approach this in a similar way to the research that resulted in COL's new easement language around water-sharing agreements and groundwater conservation in Colorado – both of which have become national models.

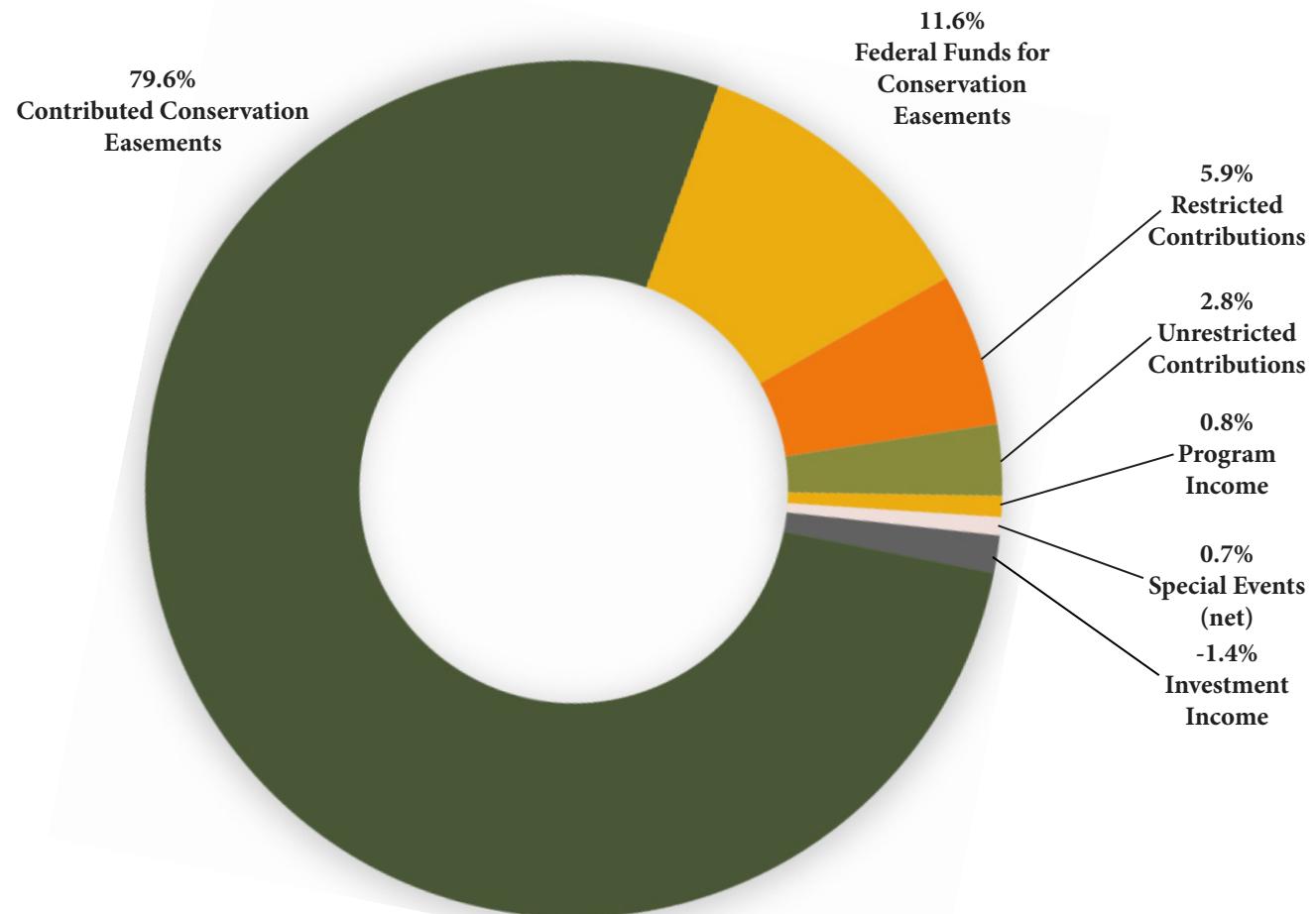
At the same time, we propose to partner with Colorado State University to take a deeper dive in the San Luis Valley to explore how conservation and solar development might coexist (and where it should not) or how siting and design might be achieved to improve revegetation success, allow for grazing, or perhaps provide benefit to certain wildlife in this landscape that will necessarily be facing a future of reduced agricultural productivity.



# FINANCIAL REPORTING

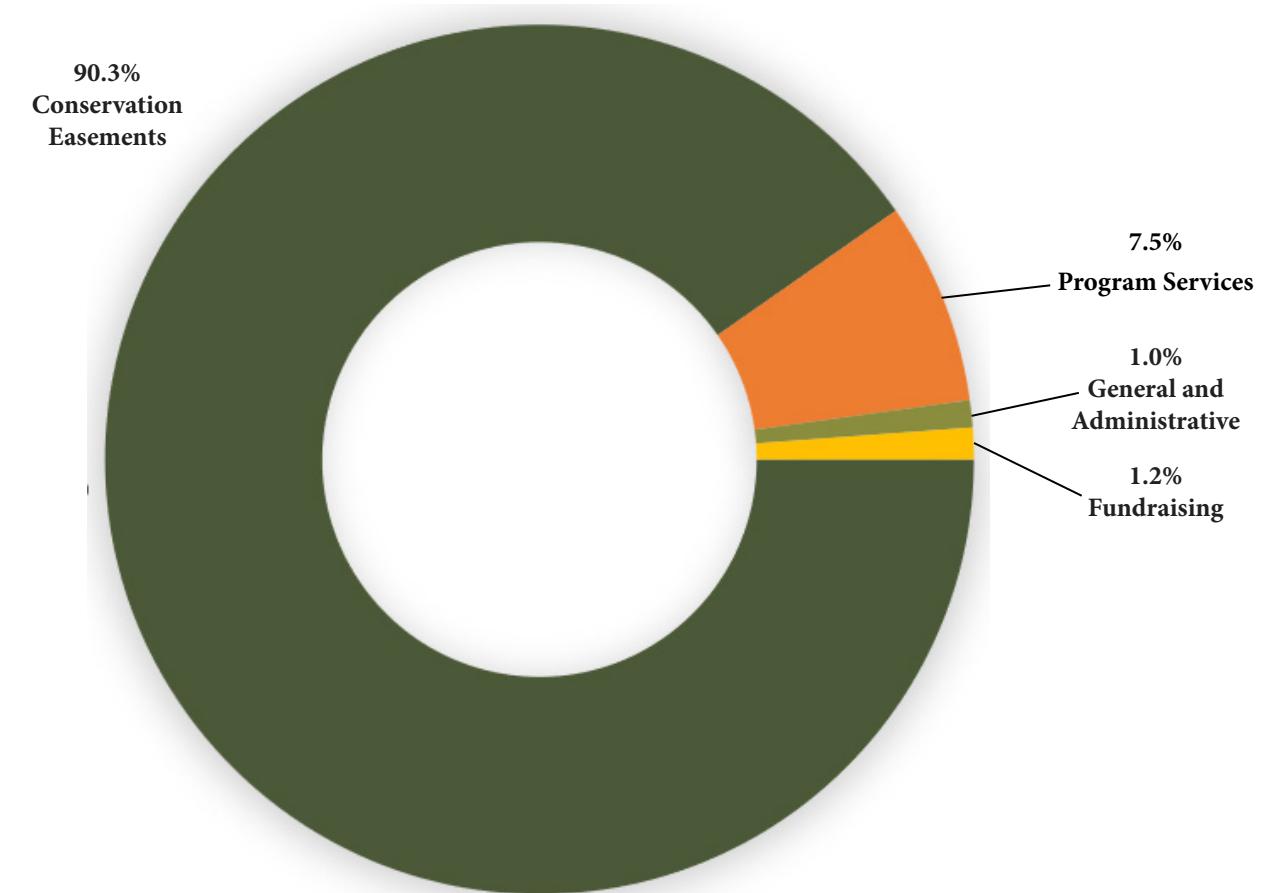
APRIL 1, 2022 - MARCH 31, 2023\*

CONSOLIDATED STATEMENTS OF COLORADO OPEN LANDS AND THE COLORADO OPEN LANDS FOUNDATION



## SUPPORT & REVENUE

Category	Amount
Contributed Conservation Easements	\$36,959,977
Federal Funds for Conservation Easements	\$5,394,823
Restricted Contributions	\$2,762,876
Unrestricted Contributions	\$1,280,165
Program Income	\$381,580
Special Events (net)	\$326,389
Investment Income (net)	(\$666,854)
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$46,438,956</b>



## EXPENSES

Category	Amount
Conservation Easements	\$42,364,800
Program Services	\$3,522,614
General and Administrative	\$473,020
Fundraising	\$550,952
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$46,911,386</b>

\*UNAUDITED AT TIME OF PUBLICATION.

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